

My Death Flags Show No Sign of Ending

by Izumi

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Chapter 097

(Zen's pov)

He was gazing at the golden flowers that were growing on the wayside, as he walked on a path which he had already grown used to by now. Had he taken the carriage that he habitually used for his job, this trip would only have taken him a dozen minutes. But it was only after walking for more than an hour that his destination finally came into view.

He was faced with the scenery of an ordinary town dotted with commoner houses (Minka houses). One of the houses that was completely blended among them was a place that was frequently visited by Zen, who worked as the coachman of the Stokes family.

The house's garden couldn't be said to be wide in any way, but it was very well maintained, and there was even a small kitchen garden in its corner. There, were fresh and fruitful red groots, which Zen was already familiar with from a long time ago. It seemed like both the garden and the person managing it were still healthy and well.

While thinking about such things, Zen sounded the knocker that was installed on the entrance door. After a short interval, the door opened with a clank.

"Yes, who's there?"

"Good day, madam."

"Oh, Zen-kun. Please come in."

The person who greeted Zen was a woman who was between 60 and 70. As she made way for him, Zen headed towards the living room where a grey-haired old man, who was rooted in his chair, was waiting for him.

That man, was Zen's old coworker who had retired a few years prior, Norman.

"Hey there, Norman-san."

Zen smiled as he greeted him in a purposely familiar way. Norman accepted the greeting and returned it as he also smiled similarly.

"Hello. I'm glad to see that you look well."

"Same to you. Oh, here, I have a present."

The present was a wooden knitted basket. Inside was an assortment of breads which had been baked at Zen's home.

"Thank you, as always. Come on, take a seat."

As Norman urged him to do so, Zen sat down, directly facing him. Despite his old age, Norman didn't have any big sickness, his days were going by peacefully after his retirement, but even so, there was still something that had been weighing on his mind for a long time. That feeling was well understood by Zen, and so, as time passed, he would sometimes come to visit Norman and share the reports that he occasionally received from Harold.

Five years had already passed since Harold had left the Stokes family to become a member of the royal saint knight order. In that time, Zen and Jake regularly sent him sealed letters by turns in order to inform him about the household's recent status, and although Harold had resigned from the saint knight order, he was still in the royal capital so the exchange of letters was still continuing at present.

Those letters were sent once every two or three months and Harold would only answer them one out of three times.

"So, what was it this time?"

"We didn't get any instructions in particular. Just that, as expected, the household's situation has been worrying him lately."

Harold had been speaking of this for eight years. Back then, he had confidently said that the Stokes family would fall sooner or later. In order to delay that fall, he had invented a new farming method called the LP farming method; furthermore, he had expanded that into a large-scale project and won over the household of the one who used to be his fiancée at the time. With the assistance of the Sumeragi family, the Stokes territory somehow recovered in a financial aspect, but the popular support was still low. There was a clear population outflow as the locals were leaving town, and although the household was temporarily getting more money from taxes thanks to the LP farming method, the farming production of each zone was limited due to the present conditions, so the household was probably grasping for its last straws.

From the very beginning, Harold had been thinking of “delaying” and not “stopping” the fall of the Stokes family, so he probably already had the assumption that the current situation would occur.

"Is that so? In the end, it seems like there isn't much we can help Harold-sama with."

Norman seemed sad as he cast down his eyes. Zen could sympathize with that feeling to the point where it felt painful.

Ever since he was a child, Harold had been excellent. He was strict yet kind with his words, he was extremely resourceful, and he was strong in both mind and body. To top it all off, he had a diligent personality that did not allow him to neglect his efforts.

He could manage most things all by himself, and although Zen was proud to work for him, at the same time he was also vexed that he could not be of help to him.

"You're right, and he's also showing concern about Huey-sama. Although they're born of a different mother, his younger brother is really adorable."

"To begin with, Harold doesn't care about his position or his influence. He probably isn't interested in fighting for succession."

"Heh, he just wants to cherish his brother, doesn't he? He even sent Huey some clothes and toys last time."

Moreover, Harold had actually sent two boxes full of those presents. Due to his situation, he could not easily come to meet his brother face to face, so he delivered a mountain of gifts to him instead for his birth celebration.

Perhaps it was hard to imagine that action coming from Harold since he was usually cold and gave the impression that he wanted to keep people away from him, but Norman and Zen were actually not surprised. When Harold had been told about Norman's retirement in one of the letters he received from the usual exchange, he had sent an expensive pottery in commemoration of that, and when he had been informed about Zen's marriage, he sent him a huge sum of money as a congratulatory gift.

Moreover, together with that, he had sent a single, simple message "You're probably going to need that, one way or another."

As one would expect, Zen had hesitated about whether or not to accept that excessively awe-inspiring gift, but considering Harold's personality, it was easy to guess that he wouldn't let Zen argue about this. So Zen kept the money without using it, saying that he was saving in preparation for an emergency, just in case.

After all, that was the kind of person Harold was. He appeared to be cold-hearted, but he was full of kindness.

However, since he himself still seriously hated letting that part of him come to the surface, there were many people in his surroundings who were afraid of him.

While thinking about what to do, Zen reached out to a cup that was placed on the table in front of him. He lifted it up from its handle up to his lips, but in the middle of his action, the cup suddenly lost its weight.

It fell down noisily and the coffee that had been poured inside was now spread out over the table.

"Aah! I-I'm sorry...."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, but the cup is..."

Zen had broken the cup. This cup was Harold's retirement present for Norman.

Zen had a lump in his throat as he apologized, for he knew that this gift was important for Norman.

"Don't worry about it, everything breaks eventually, it's only a matter of when... Still, it broke really cleanly."

"Huh?"

Only after being told about it did Zen realize. He thought the cup had slipped from his hand, but he was actually still holding the handle.

Then, why had the cup fallen? Zen noticed that a cross-section was left after the handle was separated from the cup, as if someone had cut it right off.

As Norman had said, everything would eventually break, that was inevitable.

However, although Norman had been using the cup for a few years, would it really break in such a peculiar way because of it being deteriorated over time?

For some reason, this felt like it was a bad omen.

"...Is Harold-sama safe right now?"

Norman muttered that question with a small voice while wiping the table with a cloth. However, Zen did not have any answer to offer.



(Harold's Pov)

Why did things turn out like this? Harold no longer remembered how many times he had asked himself that. He had kept asking himself that same question ever since that day eight years ago, when fate or some sort of higher power had pushed him into taking over Harold Stokes' body.

But that was in the past, what he was thinking about was his current circumstances.

Because while Harold was very capable in combat, the one who was in control of his body, Kazuki Hirasawa, was a normal person that could be found anywhere. So far, he had been taking advantage of the cheat knowledge he had gotten from the game's story, but the truth was that he was just an ordinary man.

However that did not mean he had outstanding smarts or talent as a tactician, because if not for his knowledge regarding the original story, it would have been impossible for Harold to get other people to assist him with his task, or to outwit Justus.

It was due to being aware of this that Harold was so obsessive with keeping a development where he could make use of his game knowledge. He believed that was the best decision for an ordinary man like him to survive.

However, even though this reality resembled the game, it was different since both this world and its people were actually real. So it was not strange that, consequently, things did not go as Harold expected. So, as that kept happening over and over again, Harold finally decided to give up on keeping the flow of the original story.

That was because he believed that this decision would most likely lead him to the safest ending, and the one closest to the original story's conclusion.

He still did not know if that was the right choice.

However, at present, the elements that Harold had been anxious about had all stunningly turned into reality.

As if he was in the middle of a tempest, his skin was grazed by a windstorm that was brought about by a sword's slash. The sword strike that had been aimed at him was so absurdly powerful that it made Harold wonder if the wind that came with it would be enough to lacerate him.

While barely dodging the attack, he took some distance from the opponent that was standing in front. "I didn't expect any less from him." Perhaps that was a carefree remark, but still, Harold couldn't help himself from thinking like that.

"Looks like the title of the knight order's leader isn't just for show huh, Vincent."

Vincent Van Westervoort. As the young leader of the saint royal knight order, he was a heroic figure in the public eye. But in『Brave Hearts』, he was a so-called boss character, who blocked the way of the hero's party during the last stage of the story.

He and Harold were currently crossing swords.

Harold had honestly not expected that he would fight Vincent at this point in time. In the first place, he had not expected at all that he himself would end up fighting against Vincent.

Then, why had he fallen into such a predicament? The reason was very simple.

"Harold Stokes..... Enemy.... top priority elimination target....."

Vincent had an odd look in his eyes, and he was repeating the same words over and over again as if he was talking in delirium. No matter how one looked at him, he was not in his normal condition.

That meant that Justus seriously wanted to kill Harold now.

After separating from Liner and the others in the Sumeragi territory, Harold had returned to Harrison's place by foot. He was then informed about the location of the last remaining treasured object and he headed towards there. Of course, he did it without Justus' permission.

There were already six of the treasures in the hands of Harrison, but really, that just meant they were in Justus' possession. However, Harold did not feel like following the flow of the original story anymore and he was ready to fight to the

bitter end in the few months that still remained. So he figured that if he snatched away the treasured object he would be able to delay Justus' plan. However, that was just an ordinary man's idea, and it seemed like Justus had seen that coming. What was waiting for Harold in the ruins where the treasured object was said to be was a Vincent who had lost his sanity.

"Hey, trash! Why the hell are you attacking me?"

"Harold is the top priority elimination target....."

With a strange light in his eyes, Vincent just repeated the same words he had said before. Harold had tried to converse with him many times since earlier but there were no results.

It was likely that Vincent had been brainwashed. Much like the two people from the stellar tribe, he had lost his free will, but perhaps the brainwashing was incomplete considering that he could still speak words.

Therefore, Harold tried to see if he could solve this through dialogue, but he didn't have much hope for that.

While taking a step so powerful that it sunk the ground, Vincent drew out a big sword and attacked with a large slash. Harold dodged, and went towards Vincent's back, which was full of openings. He would have no chance of winning if he tried to attack right from the front given Vincent's high attack power. Hence why Harold opposed him with his own forte instead, his high speed. However, Vincent stopped the attack that came from his back with his left hand gauntlet. That attack was carrying Harold's speed and strength with it, and yet Vincent had easily stopped it with a single arm. He was so robust that Harold felt like he had slashed at a wall.

On top of that, Vincent was using only his right hand to swing a big sword that seemed like it would be difficult to even lift for a regular person. His offense was also sharper and faster than the average knight's. But rather than slashes, he made use of crushing blows.

In the game, a character would only lose some HP upon being hit by these kinds of attack, but in this world, a single blow would be fatal. Although Harold considered using his R-Guard, he was afraid the strike would ignore his defense and hit him, so he abandoned the idea and continued dodging.

Because of his heavy equipment and heavy weapon, Vincent's speed did not feel like it would be a threat, however, he made up for that with his outstandingly high durability and attack power. But the most troublesome part was that, in the span of the moment when Vincent swung his sword and the moment when he blocked Harold's sword with his gauntlet, he became fast enough for him to deal with Harold's speed.

It was difficult for Vincent to maintain his own speed due to the stamina that it consumed and due to the burden there was on his body from his equipment, but during the decisive parts of the battle, his offense and defense's speed would become astonishing. This was yet another element that was different from the game, and it made sense.

Because, even though Vincent had a high attack power and a demon-like durability despite being slow-witted at the moment, that alone probably would not have been enough for him to climb up to the rank of the leader of the knight order. In reality, he had earned that position simply because he had little to no exploitable openings.

There were two choices facing Harold now.

The first one was to give up on the treasured object and escape. With Vincent as his opponent, getting away was not going to be difficult.

However, if Harold did that, all the treasured objects would be in Justus' possession. Although in a certain sense, things were going the same way they did in the game, Harold could not throw away his suspicion that the original story's events might occur ahead of schedule. If that were to happen, then perhaps Liner and the others' progress would not be fast enough for them to be ready by the time of the last event.

The second choice was to defeat Vincent right here.

Originally, Vincent was supposed to be prompted by Justus into fighting Liner and the others at the last stage of the story, but in this world, that was most likely not the case. Because in the game, the main reasons why Vincent had been coaxed into working for Justus were that after the Beltis forest battle, his best friend Cody had left the knight order, moreover, following the massive killing of the stellar tribe's people, the order had lost its authority. The accumulated mental fatigue from these happenings had weakened Vincent and Justus had taken advantage of that.

However, since all of these things had been prevented by Harold's actions, he had thought that Justus would probably not be able to coax Vincent into working for him, and that was indeed the case.

Therefore, Justus had resorted to a more drastic measure: brainwashing. But it wasn't in order to kill the Hero, Liner, rather, it was to kill the one who played the part of the villain, Harold.

"You bastard....!"

If Harold were to withdraw, then Vincent, in his brainwashed state, would join Justus as his subordinate. He would become Justus' trump card, his joker. Thus, Justus's plan would surely progress even faster.

Harold would not have enough brains to read through the timing of such a development that would diverge completely from the original story. No matter what he did, Harold would end up falling behind for sure, and he was afraid that he would find himself driven into a corner, unable to stop Justus because of that.

So he had no choice but to defeat Vincent here. However, looking at this from another point of view, it was a golden opportunity to reduce Justus' war potential.

Therefore, Harold resolved himself.

"..... Vincent Van Westervoort. This place will be your grave."

This was a battle against an opponent that Harold wasn't sure he could beat, and if he lost this fight, he would most likely die.

In reality, he did not want to use "it" until the very end, but if he kept being so particular about that, he would likely die with all his efforts amounting to nothing. Right now, the only thing he was thinking about was defeating Vincent, and he was going to do everything that was in his power for that goal.

"Let's go!"

Harold shouted, and the jade green crystal that was embedded on the sword in his right hand shone with a subtle sparkle.

Chapter 098

In『Brave Hearts』, Harold Stokes was not a dual sword wielder; his only weapon was his black sword. The sword embedded with a crystal that Harold was currently using did not exist at all in the game, as it was given to him by Justus in this world.

Of course, that was not an act of kindness in any way; Justus was simply using that sword to convince his surroundings that Harold was just a convenient pawn who he had already subdued.

However, given how good he was at scheming, there was naturally more to this.

The sword had the exceptional ability of absorbing the user's mana to elevate his fighting capabilities, but if the sword could not be controlled and absorbed Harold's magical power just by being in his presence, then even he would likely have stubbornly refused to take it.

Because whenever it absorbed the user's mana, it would literally absorb his life force. So this was a very Justus-like trick, as he had told only half a lie.

Due to this, Harold had hardly used this power up to now. So far, he had displayed the sword's ability only twice.

The first time was when he happened to discover a troupe of knights who had been attacked and almost annihilated by monsters, so, in order to help; he killed the enemies as fast as he possibly could. The second time was when he instantaneously killed the hydras at the peak of mount Giran.

Both of those times lasted for only a few minutes. However, given that his lifespan was being reduced by this, even a few minutes felt like they could be fatal to him. Not knowing how much of his life he had lost was indescribably terrifying.

So Harold had used the sword's power as little as possible. He was always wracking his brains and trying every trick in the book just because he did not want to die, so if he actually went ahead to shorten his life, he would be completely losing sight of his priorities.

However, at this moment, he simply could not say that, because Vincent was

just that formidable of an enemy.

In order to make the best use of his distinctly superior speed, Harold's feet were constantly in motion. He was using magic spells as a diversion as he was crossing swords with Vincent while looking for his chance to strike. If Harold were to relax his guard for the smallest of instants, his defense would likely be smashed and he'd end up being overwhelmed by Vincent's tyrannical strength, therefore, he kept on attacking and defending over and over again.

Then, it finally came. In the middle of the fight, Vincent had a momentary opening in his defense for less than a second. At that moment, Harold focused his whole body's senses.

He stepped forward with lightning fast speed.

Due to his physique and weapon, the reach of Vincent's attacks was considerably wider than Harold's. This was one of the main reasons why Harold was at a loss about how to attack him. In other words, exploiting an opening was not enough. It was certainly possible for him to take the offensive by combining his speed with his numerous moves, but that would be too risky considering Vincent's strength and the instantaneous power and reflexes he displayed in both his offense and defense. Moreover, if Harold were to expose a few gaps, he'd fall back on the defensive. To make matters worse, he would have to fight within the range of Vincent's attacks.

But above all, Harold did not have enough strength to knock out Vincent with a single blow anyway, and he couldn't help but judge that it would be too difficult to attack one of his vital points.

Then, what could he do?

Harold's answer to that question was clear and simple.

He would keep dodging and using diversions, he would strike when there was a gap he could exploit, and then he would immediately retreat, taking some distance from Vincent. It was a so-called hit-and-run tactic.

Vincent started raising his sword over his head, and at the same time, Harold immediately shortened the distance between the two of them. Vincent stopped his action, and while taking half a step back, he had no other choice than to swing his large sword downwards.

However, no matter how powerful he was, he had not been able to feel the

attack from before as it came at him.

Harold was aiming at the right arm of Vincent, which was holding his sword. Maybe in order not to disrupt the movement of his shoulder, he had left the space around his right armpit wide open. Harold sliced at that gap in Vincent's defense with his black sword.

Then, he withdrew before Vincent could get to counterattack. Harold once again took some distance and faced Vincent like before.

Perhaps this method was effective in the sense that it was a sure-fire way to deliver his attacks.

However, there was one problem. To instantaneously shorten the distance between him and his opponent, Harold was using a super-acceleration move for which his sword would absorb his mana each time. As he used it this time, he was afraid of how long this battle would drag, for he didn't know how much of his mana, and of his life, was being consumed.

The part of Vincent's armpit which Harold had sliced at with his sword was covered with a black cloth. But slicing that part did not feel like cutting through human flesh, the attack had been clearly obstructed by a hard object.

Harold had an idea what it was. There was probably some chain mail or something like that, hidden under Vincent's clothes. Unless he could strike that protection with a critical hit, Harold was going to have to attack it multiple times during the fight.

If he wasn't in such a small cave, he could also try to take some distance and fire high-tier spells in rapid succession to remove that obstruction, but if he did that here, he would likely get entangled in his own magic, or the spell would make the whole cave collapse, crushing him to death in the process.

"This has been going for way too long..."

The situation was turning extremely bad for Harold.

Perhaps he would end up being killed by Vincent, or perhaps he would end up using up all his strength and dying to his own sword's power.

Still, in order to survive, he could do nothing but keep fighting.



As if to repel the darkness, the tree branches that were being used as

firewood were burning with a crackling sound. Holding her knees, Lifa was looking at the flames while thinking about some things.

Or perhaps it was more correct to say that she was worrying about some things. Those worries were about Harold, and at the same time, they were about Erica who was journeying with her now.

Erica was the daughter of the Sumeragi family, and she currently was Lifa's traveling companion, as well.

Her personality was gentle and graceful, and yet she also had a strong heart which allowed her to firmly speak her opinions. She wasn't naive like a girl who had led a sheltered life, and she viewed everything in a broad perspective.

Moreover, she was so skilled with her magic and archery that even knights and adventurers were not worth being compared to her.

She came from a good family, her character was excellent, and she also excelled in various other fields. The more Lifa traveled with her, the more she was able to understand how perfect Erica was as a woman.

Furthermore, she was the most beautiful person Lifa had ever seen. When Colette spoke of her unreserved admiration for Erica, Lifa could only agree. Perhaps it could be said that she was the personification of a man's ideal.

That perfect woman was Harold's fiancée... or so it seemed at least. Although the two concerned parties themselves had denied that fact, Francis and Erica's older brother had both said that the two were actually engaged, so there was probably no way that was a lie.

Then, why would Erica deny it? If she simply hated Harold, then perhaps that would be the end of the matter, but it was hard to believe that someone like her would openly show her hatred for him on the surface.

It felt too incompatible with her personality, which reminded Lifa of something else that had felt the same way to her recently. It was Harold's excessive coldness towards Erica.

From Lifa's perspective, it looked like both Harold and Erica didn't seem like themselves in the way they behaved towards each other.

This was just a theory, but, maybe Harold was cold to Erica in order to keep her away from him. That way, she would not get hurt by his own death.... No, perhaps he did that precisely because he did not want her to be hurt. It was

very difficult to understand the kindness of that man due to his twisted personality, but Lifa judged that this possibility was quite conceivable.

As for Erica, maybe she was also taking Harold's feelings into consideration, and was taking a stubborn attitude towards him in order to pretend that she disliked him, just like he wished she would. She knew Harold from her childhood; she could basically be classified as a childhood friend of his. Lifa did not know since when Harold had taken on his arrogant behavior and for how long he had kept it going, but while he did have a perfectionist's atmosphere to him, he was still flawed, and so was his facade. Upon coming in contact with him for long enough, one would surely have many opportunities to notice the kindness hidden beyond Harold's clumsy behavior. That was all the more true for an intelligent person like Erica.

There was no clear basis behind Lifa's hypothesis. To come up with this wild idea, she had merely linked the facts that both of them did not seem to behave like themselves. Normally, if Lifa had come up with a theory that made such a huge leap in logic, she would laugh it off and wouldn't concern herself with it. Nevertheless, she could not cast aside her idea precisely because it was still just a hypothesis. Because if by any chance these assumptions turned out to be true or just close to the truth, then Erica might get scarred for her whole life.

The crucial point here was: how much did Erica know about Harold's situation? Considering that Harold was trying to keep Erica away, and that she did not want to go against his wish, then she probably was not aware that he did not have much time left to live. The best reason to think so was that, the first time Lifa came to the Sumeragi territory with Harold, he had forbidden her to speak about his life span.

No matter how one looked at her, Erica was not the type to put her feelings of hatred on the surface. She was only human, so, there had to be times when she would get angry, and there had to be some people that she actually disliked within her mind; But there was no doubt that she would hide those kinds of feelings under a smile and behave herself on the outside. Then why did she not do that only when it came to Harold? Wasn't it because

that was what Harold wanted?

If so, then that meant they were both subduing their real feelings for each other's sake.

The reason Lifa thought so was that, knowing Erica's nature, it seemed unlikely for her to truly dislike Harold.

Five of the six members of the team that was traveling together, in other words, everyone except for Erica, had a favorable opinion of Harold; they were a very unusual group. But even though they were certainly a strange bunch, Erica was still willing to seriously listen to their opinions and consider them. Yet, only when it came to Harold, she was obstinate in saying that he was evil, and she was not willing to change her views; that was way too strange and too unfitting of Erica's character in Lifa's eyes. Even when Liner and Colette tried to persuade her by telling her "Harold is not the man that the rumors make him out to be", Erica persisted, saying "There is no understanding that man's true nature."

It was as if she was trying to advertise to her surroundings that "Erica Sumeragi hates Harold stokes". To Lifa, it felt like there was no way Erica would use such substanceless words just because of her own personal hatred. It was safe to think that she was just putting on such an act because she had some particular circumstances, and what if those circumstances were that, for Harold's sake, she was taking on the attitude that he wanted her to take?

In that case, then if Harold were to die, would Erica's heart be able to bear it? While Lifa had managed to keep quiet despite knowing that Harold did not have much time left to live, she believed that even she would be crushed and unable to bear it if he were to actually die.

However if she were to tell the truth to Erica here, then she would be breaking her promise with Harold...

"I can't do that...."

Lifa let those words escape her as she sighed. Then, a voice came at her completely defenseless back.

"Can't do what?"

"Ah...!"

Lifa almost instinctively screamed because of that surprise attack, but she had somehow managed to stop that reflex.

However, her excessive surprise was not due to the sudden appearance of the voice, rather, it was because of the owner of said voice.

"W, what is it, Erica?"

"It's time to switch places for the night watch."

"Huh? Really? Isn't it still too early?"

"No no, it's already time...."

Upon being told that, Lifa consulted her watch. As Erica had said, there were only a few minutes left before she would have to switch places with her. It seemed like Lifa had been considerably absorbed in her thoughts. Moreover, it looked like Liner, who was keeping watch with her, had fallen asleep. She had apparently been too engrossed in her thoughts to notice that.

"Oh, it's true. I'm sorry, I forgot to wake you up."

"Don't worry about that. But it looks like you have something on your mind...."

"Oh...."

It would be difficult for Lifa to say frankly and unreservedly that she was worried about the relationship between Harold and Erica. That would be akin to walking straight into a minefield.

Besides, she had promised Harold that she wouldn't talk about the matter concerning his life span. Above all, even if she tried to question Erica in an upfront manner about their relationship, she likely would not get an answer. But even so, it didn't fit Lifa's nature to just stand and watch without doing anything.

So, she was going to start the discussion from another direction. *"This is probably none of my business but I have to do it"*, while thinking that, Lifa confirmed that everyone other than Erica and herself was asleep, and she then started talking.

"...Erica, is there someone you're in love with?"

Chapter 099

(Lifa's Pov)

Erica did not appear to be shaken by that question which had come out of seemingly nowhere.

"Why are you asking such a thing?"

"I'm curious, that's all. You denied that you're Harold's fiancée, so I was wondering if maybe that was because there was someone else you liked."

"That's not the case. It's just that there is too big a difference between the values and ways of thinking of Harold and I."

"So you're saying that you two just can't be together?"

"That's right."

This was the exact same answer that Erica had always given so far on this journey.

At this point, it would likely have been meaningless for Lifa to ask whether that answer was a lie, because she had no actual basis upon which she could overturn Erica's words.

Saying that Erica was amazing as a person was no exaggeration. It was only by traveling alongside her that Lifa had come to know that even a girl like Erica had a weak point of her own. However, Lifa herself was hesitant about calling that part a weak point in the sense that taking advantage of it would likely be no easy task. But perhaps Erica herself was quite aware of her own weakness, hence why she had to be careful not to expose that particular side of her. Her strong rejection of Harold was probably a consequence of this.

Erica was particularly quick to share her opinions openly when it came to speaking about Harold, that was why Lifa figured that Erica was actually putting on a front in order to camouflage her feelings.

Moreover, that camouflage was hardly flawless. Or at least, it was bad enough that it made Lifa doubt whether Erica's words of rejections towards

Harold were actually real. And yet, Liner and Colette did not seem to have noticed anything at all... But Lifa made do by telling herself that "Well, it's probably because they're too pure".

"...I don't want to try to persuade you or anything, but there is something I'd like to tell you, will you hear me out?"

"I am listening, you have all my attention."

"Thanks" After saying that, Lifa took several seconds before she started speaking again.

"You see, I'm quite the eccentric person. Back when I was living in my village, even my own family had shunned me, and I didn't fit anywhere. Well, that's only natural since I used to only study without ever actually working."

Lifa was openly speaking of her past, which she had not even told Harold about.

"At first, I started studying because I wanted to change this world where people who have no talent in magic have no other choice than living in poverty. If, through science, even someone who cannot use magic properly becomes able to use spells which aren't inferior to the spells of those who were born with talent, then the world... No, actually, I hadn't thought things through that far. But I still felt it would be great if my family and village could become wealthy."

As she said she would, Erica was quietly and attentively listening. The fact that she was not showing any pity nor extending her sympathy was actually a good thing from Lifa's point of view, it made it easy for her to talk. Lifa was not particularly trying to fish for attention or pity; Erica had probably guessed as much and was therefore behaving accordingly. In any case, from Lifa's perspective, her life story was not a tale about misfortune but a tale about how she had paid for her own mistakes.

"But, although I don't know when exactly it happened, my feelings on the matter changed at some point. Looking at my family and village who had abandoned me because of my devotion to science, I started thinking that... Well, in short, I became stubborn. So, when I hit a wall and found myself in a bind, I did a lot of unreasonable things."

Lifa felt like perhaps this story would be quite absurd for others to hear. Even if she was told that she had just been a young girl who knew nothing about reality and had been stubbornly pursuing a dream that was too far beyond her, Lifa would not be able to deny it.

"It was at that time that I happened to come across that guy. I left the worst impression on him in our first meeting, and I kept telling him offensive things. I guess that was mostly because of the gossips about him, but still."

Perhaps Lifa would have left a slightly better impression if Elu, who had just happened to be there, hadn't informed her about the rumors surrounding Harold.

Nonetheless, if Elu hadn't told her that much, she likely would not have asked Harold to escort her.

"...That guy, he didn't laugh at my efforts. Now that I think about it, he probably had some ulterior motives, and I did end borrowing the help of Justus, too, which is pretty annoying, but ultimately, it's because Harold reached his hand to me that I was able to move forward."

Lifa figured that Harold's actions had undoubtedly been guided by his own selfish interests on some level. Perhaps she had only been used by him. Moreover, it could be said that she had caused quite some trouble to Harold by accepting Justus' invitation.

However, no matter what, it was not because she owed Harold a favor nor because she wanted to atone herself from her mistake that Lifa wished to do something for him. It was because of a much more simple reason.

It was because Harold was just as lonely as her... Or rather, he was struggling against an even harsher loneliness than hers, yet he had acknowledged her efforts in a certain way. And Lifa was delighted about that.

That fact alone made her want to stick with him, and although that feeling of solidarity might have been one-sided, it was enough of a reason for her to want to support and help Harold, regardless of how dangerous that was. "I'm probably the only who'd understand this feeling" She thought with a wry smile.

She used to always be working hard, all by her lone self. And yet, there were many times when she wavered, thinking that maybe her lonesome, self-

satisfied ways were a mistake.

Back then, she believed that she would always be solitary, and she had spent countless nights crying in fear, thinking that perhaps all of her efforts would never be recognized by anyone.

Harold had put a light in the darkness she had been locked in and had showed her the path forward. Other people likely would not understand how much of a salvation that had been for her.

"...I was saved by Harold. Even if he had ulterior motives, that fact won't change."

That fact alone was plenty enough.

Lifa had been saved by Harold. So, this time, she wanted to be the one reaching her hand out to her savior. Even if that was impossible for her, even if her help would just be an annoyance to him, Lifa could not help herself from doing so.

"... I see you have got a lot of trust from Harold-sama, Lifa-san."

"Trust, huh..."

From the outside, it would certainly seem like one could trust and rely on Harold's aberrant fighting strength and such. No matter who his opponent was, he would never be defeated easily in battle, but putting her trust in him on that aspect was too much since his lifespan was being lowered by that sword of his, as for...

(Wait, no. Just now, Erica said that I got trust "From" him, not "for" him.... why would she put it like that—— ?)

Lifa momentarily blanked out. "That's only a small change, isn't it?" She thought.

However, driven by a kind of intuition instead of her thoughts, Lifa raised her head. There, she saw Erica's eyes wavering, as the impregnable barrier that she usually kept on her face for appearances' sake had been destroyed.

The two girls' lines of sight were perfectly aligned. Erica showed a slight agitation in her eyes before her expression turned into one of resignation, as if she was realizing that she had been caught in the act.

At that point, Lifa's thoughts caught up to her intuition. 'Oh, so that's what's going on' She affirmed in her mind.

At last, she managed to connect the countless fragments of information which had been scattered all around so far.

Why was it that the first thing Erica had recognized upon hearing the earlier story was the fact that Harold had placed his trust in Lifa? Perhaps it was because she was convinced that Harold was the one who had purposely allowed Lifa's actions. Erica's evaluation of Harold was too absolute. And although her words had not shown it, there was a hint of envy oozing out of her tone of voice. It was already clear why Erica had been shaken immediately after speaking.

"Ah..."

Lifa let out a big sigh to break the silence. But Erica, who was facing her, stayed quiet and did not say anything.

After a short pause, Lifa returned to the conversation with a question.

"I have no idea why, but Harold's trying to keep his distance from you. You're aware of that, right?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"And that's the reason why you seem to dislike Harold. Because Harold wants you to dislike him."

Erica closed her eyes as if to resist something. Then, she looked up at the night sky, and spoke out words that seemed to be painful for her to say.

"I suppose I would have to think twice before saying that that's not the case, this is the only answer I can give."

Erica's line implied that Lifa was right indeed. As expected, it was to go along with Harold's own intentions that Erica was so obstinately behaving like she disliked him. Paradoxically, she was doing all of that for him.

"You can keep making up excuses, but you should just be frank and admit the truth straightforwardly."

"Even if I do that, I'm afraid you won't understand it, Lifa-san."

It seemed like that somehow was Erica's evaluation of Lifa. Although Lifa was somewhat irritated by that, now was not the time for her to focus on her own self.

"There is one thing I'd like to make clear, it's that Harold doesn't particularly trust me. I only got to accompany him by being unreasonably pushy, he actually didn't want me to come, so much so that he threatened me to stop me from following him."

But, although she might have been an annoyance to Harold, Lifa still knew that her intervention hadn't been useless since she had played a part in solving the miasma problem.

"Also, Erica, do you know why Harold's trying so hard to keep his distance from you?"

After pulling herself back from her irritation, Lifa kept her line of questioning going.

"That's because he believes that no good would come from the two of us being linked to each other. But, as for what he's specifically concerned about, I..."

Erica spoke evasively. But Lifa knew what was really happening. The conversation had just taken a direction that even she did not like. Her stomach was throbbing, and her own emotions became heavy, as if she had drunk lead. This turn of event was close to the worst development among Lifa's predictions.

"In that case", she wondered "What can I do? What should I say?" Various ideas were whirling all about inside her head.

"...I want to ask you one more question."

"What is it?"

"What do you think of Harold? I'd like you to tell me what you truly feel."

It was surely not going to be easy for Erica to reply, this was likely a question that she did not want to answer at all.

However, if this point was not made clear, things would not be able to go

forward from here for Lifa, for Erica, and maybe even for Harold.

"....I love Harold-sama. And I've been in love with him since I was a child."

Said Erica, with her voice sounding like she was confessing for a serious crime. It was painfully clear how much of a taboo this subject was from Erica's perspective. And at the same time, Lifa could feel how deep Erica's feelings for Harold were.

When Lifa and Erica faced each other in the Sumeragi family's mansion, Erica had said "I think you and I are going to have a hard time on this journey". At the time, Lifa thought Erica was implying that that the both of them were destined to go through some hardships since they were both getting involved in the troubles that were brought by Harold.

But thinking back upon it, there had been other implications coming from Erica's gaze at the time. She had probably said those words thinking that both of them were similar in the fact that they were both people who cared for Harold and were taking action for his sake.

Lifa had not noticed this on the spot because she barely knew Erica at the time. But well, even if she had noticed back then, it likely would not have changed anything.

Because, at the end of the day, even if they did want to take action for Harold's sake, there was no way for Lifa and Erica to do it since they did not know how they should go about it, and they still were not even aware of what Harold's goals were.

Nevertheless, Lifa believed that this relation was wrong, she believed it was wrong that Erica was lying about her own feelings out of consideration for the intentions of Harold, who did not want to be approached and who was reducing his lifespan yet was still going forward despite the fact that he was at risk of death.

Lifa was fully aware that human relations were the problem of the concerned parties and no one else's, however, she was also certain that Erica would be very deeply wounded upon Harold's eventual and inevitable death if things still stood as they were by then. Overlooking the situation would be absolutely wrong for Lifa, not as only as Erica's friend, but also as a human being.

"That means you know that he'll do anything for his goals, right?"

"Yes, I'm well aware."

Erica had known Harold since childhood. It wasn't clear when she had developed her feelings for him, but she had likely had to see him quite often in order reach that point.

Perhaps that what why it seemed like she could not see any of his flaws and her respect for him was beyond absolute. And, when thinking about it, Harold really was a great person. It was not strange to think that of him for someone who had witnessed his accomplishments from up close.

Moreover, Lifa believed that this applied all the more to people who were wise enough to understand how difficult it had been for Harold to do everything he had done.

However, Erica was overestimating him. No matter how great he was, there was a limit to how much one man could accomplish by himself. Yet, despite this, Erica had faith in every single one of Harold's decisions. Hence why she unconditionally acted the way he would want her to. But that was far past the point of trust, it was simply blind belief.

"Sure, Harold is very capable and I believe he's a man who can pull off what no normal person can do. But he's only human, just like us. So it only makes sense that even he can be wrong and make mistakes at times, right?"

"...This is hard to hear."

"I think you're a person who can calmly think things through, Erica, so you should understand my point. I might be saying something you're already aware of, but it seems to me like you've been desperately trying to better yourself because you don't want to be a burden on him."

"I am... I have no confidence in myself."

Saying that, Erica showed a self-mocking smile.

"It doesn't suit her." Thought Lifa to herself upon seeing Erica in that state.

"Can I really help Harold-sama? ...How could I ever be confident about such a thing?"

The two girls switched their roles in the conversation; this time, Erica was the

one who started talking.

She began speaking of her life, while offering Lifa a glimpse into Harold's past at the same time.



(Erica's Pov)

"I first met Harold-sama eight years ago, I was ten years old back then."

It was because she had been engaged to him due to political reasons that Erica had gotten the chance to know about Harold Stokes' existence. In those days, she had understood the position she was in, and although she was in no way completely enthusiastic about her engagement, she had accepted that there was no going around it.

She had been trying to believe that, as the feudal lord's daughter, it was only natural for her to marry Harold if that could improve the people's living conditions.

Thinking about it now, Erica felt like she would not have been able to keep herself from being displeased if she had become related to the Stokes family, given their discriminatory doctrines.

However, the boy who had suddenly become Erica's fiancé had come up with a drug that could suppress the effects of the miasma that was spreading diseases in the Sumeragi territory. In addition, the Sumeragi family only had to pay for the materials and the manufacturing process, the boy had practically offered the drug against no compensation.

Although he himself had insisted that he was just selling them a favor, he should not have needed to do such a thing since, back then, the Sumeragi family had already been in a position where they were being supported by the Stokes family.

At that point in time, Erica's impression of Harold had risen considerably.

"However, because of a certain matter, I started utterly detesting Harold-sama back then."

"A certain matter?"

Erica hesitated a little before talking, but she still started speaking about the matter.

Starting from Lifa, everyone who was present here already knew what kind of man Harold truly was, so there was no problem. In Colette's case, she had even played a major role in the case that Erica was about to speak of.

"At the time, there was a story circulating in the Stokes family's territory about how Harold-sama had murdered one of his mansion's employees together with her daughter. And so, I asked him whether that rumor was true. "】

Even now, Erica could still remember asking Harold while wishing that those gossips were completely groundless.

But Harold had crushed her wish and confirmed the rumors.

"All he said was 'I killed them because they were getting on my nerves', and 'They're my servants, I'm perfectly free to kill them or let them live on a whim'. He also insulted them, saying that servants were an inferior species."

Back then, Erica had felt both rage and despair. Being still young, she had found herself unable to manage those intense feelings, not knowing how to blow off her anger.

"However, his objective was actually to make me believe that. In reality, thanks to Harold-sama's doing, the servant and her daughter had both survived and escaped from the Stokes family's territory."

He had deceived his parents, he had prepared the path and means of escape of the mother and daughter, and he had given them a large amount of money, enough so that they would not be troubled in their new life.

On top of that, to this day, he had kept on bearing the stigma of a murderer just so that he could give full priority to the safety of the attendant and her daughter.

"...That really sounds like something Harold would do."

"Indeed it does, and I eventually came to know about that."

Harold's strength, grandeur, and kindness.

When Erica noticed those traits, it had already been too late.

"I see. And all these elements were more than enough for you to fall in love with him, huh."

"Yes, by the time I became aware of it, it was already too late."

Well, at first, she had been restraining herself due to her guilty conscience and she had been unable allow herself to actually think that she had fallen in love with him, nevertheless, there was no doubt that that whole matter with the servant and her daughter was the main reason why Erica came to see Harold in a good light.

"He is always working himself absurdly hard, so I have been doing what I can in order to reduce his burden, even if only a little."

So as not to worry Harold needlessly, Erica had continued to take on the attitude he wanted her to take. She had also been training herself intensively in the use of healing magic, so as to be able to heal him in case he would ever suffer from a big injury.

In order to be able to keep up with him, she had not only studied how to conduct herself in the noble society and how to manage a territory properly, but she also studied various other fields to broaden her knowledge. Moreover, so that she would not need to be protected, she had improved her attack magic, her archery, and her martial art skills.

"...However, thinking about it now, I was just taking a passive attitude."

If Erica did not want to worry Harold, she should have faced him directly so that the two of them would have been able to understand each other, then she could have put her efforts into building some trust with him, to eventually ask him what role he really wanted her to play. Had she done that, perhaps Harold would not have suffered from such serious wounds on that day.

Because, no matter how much she had polished herself, it was meaningless if Harold deemed that he did not need her. And given his personality, it was obviously very unlikely that he would come by himself to the conclusion that she was necessary to him.

Yet the moment he would start thinking "I need her", he would lose the choice of walking away, and the only option left for him would be to find a compromise with her.

『Watch over him to see what he's trying to achieve, support him, stay close to him, and you'll become able to truly understand him.』

Those were the words that Erica had been offered by her father. She had been putting a lot of effort into accomplishing that, but she was now fully realizing that she had completely failed.

Was she watching over Harold? No, she was only looking at him from a distance.

Was she supporting him? No.

Had she stayed close to him in difficult times? No, Harold did not want that.

Was she able to understand why he was putting himself in so much risk? No, she did not know what he was thinking.

Things had taken an awful turn. And the fact that Harold did not want Erica to help was no excuse.

It was by going against Harold's own intentions that Lifa had earned his trust. If Erica really had been thinking of Harold's well-being, wouldn't she also have faced him with her true feelings and opinions, no matter how much he rejected her?

The only reason she could not do that was nothing more than the fact that she did not have the courage to do it. Due to her fear of being rejected and her desire to protect herself, she was unable to take a single step forward. She had been running away from the very beginning, avoiding to actually face Harold, clinging on the uncertain hope that perhaps one day, he would be the one to reach out to her.

"How shameful of me..."

If she kept thinking back to her past mistakes, she would never be done. Perhaps things would have taken a different turn if Erica had clearly said what she had been thinking when she had taken Harold's hand on that boat in the town of Kablan.

But even then, she had been too afraid.

She had only been able to jokingly say "No matter how much of a sinner you are, I'm willing to accept you—Well, that's probably what my brother would tell you".

Would she ever be able to get over her fear of getting hurt and to reach a compromise with Harold?

Lifa was able to do it, but Erica simply could not, that was the difference between them. And this made Erica realize that, in the end, her feelings did not amount to much.

So there was no way she could be confident in herself. She had yet to do a single thing for Harold.

She believed that all her hard work had no meaning since she had only done it to satisfy herself.

And, above all, she hated herself for speaking about the matter concerning Clara and Colette despite having vowed to keep that secret sealed in her heart until the day Harold would be willing to tell her about it upfront.

Due to Lifa's words, Erica was being completely overwhelmed by her own cumulated foolishness.

"Erica..."

It seemed like Lifa wanted to cheer Erica up but she did not know what to say. However, that only served to make Erica feel more and more ashamed for imposing her own troubles on others. She felt like the least she could do now was to behave as usual.

"Forgive me for complaining like this. Well then, you should go get some rest Lifa-san, it's getting late."

"But...."

"Don't worry about me, I am fine."

Afterwards, the two of them continued to have similar back and forths, until Lifa finally gave in and entered the tent while still worrying about Erica.

Having been left on her own, Erica was staring at the campfire that was still burning. However, for some reason, she was not feeling any warmth from it. Even after she threw twigs inside the fire and strengthened it, there was no change.

'Ah, maybe that's what having a broken heart feels like' She thought, as if this was someone else's problem.

"...I'm not worthy of being by your side."

Then, she finally let these words out. Until now, she had been stopping those

words rom coming out of her mouth over and over again, to the point where they were very deeply imprinted in her mind.

After that, tears gathered inside Erica eyes until they started falling. The only warmth she was able to feel at the moment was from the tears that were running down her cheeks.

However, that warmth was reminiscent of the deep affection and love that she felt for Harold, and she was afraid, afraid that those feelings were flowing out of her endlessly as she continued to weep quietly, until the sun started rising in the sky.

Chapter 100

Both of his hands felt heavy as he held his sword. The mere act of holding his stance to keep the point of his blade above the ground was making him even more tired.

Despite all the aberrant training that he was usually putting his body through, Harold was reaching the limits of his endurance.

More than an hour had passed since the start of the battle. That would not have been a problem for him in an ordinary fight, but this was a fight to the death, against an opponent who was as strong as him. Using a long sword over a long period of time in this setting was not good for his mental.

While Harold had speed on his side, his opponent was launching one attack after the other to cover that gap, and a single clean hit from any of those blows would be powerful enough to bring the battle to its end. Although that alone was troublesome enough, the attacks were also rapidly becoming more precise. There were already several times where Harold had failed to dodge the blows and had blocked them instead, but his defense was surpassed by the damage created by Vincent's strength and the mass of his sword. Owing to that, Harold's left hand was severely numb, having almost completely lost its grip, and his black sword had already fallen to the ground.

Earlier, he had been afraid that the enemy's blade would completely overwhelm his guard and strike him directly, so he was now feeling relieved knowing that he could somewhat defend himself. Even so, his whole body was creaking and his face was distorted in pain.

He was running out of breath, and although he had no fatal injuries, his body was full of bleeding wounds. Harold's battle against Vincent was simply that fierce.

Vincent was brandishing a large sword that closely resembled a Zanbato, or a long Katana. There was currently too much distance between the two foes for that sword's length to be of any use, but a light blue aura was starting to appear on its blade. Harold immediately recognized said aura and jumped even further

away from Vincent.

As if implying that he did not care about that, Vincent swung the sword down to strike the floor beneath him.

There was a heavy, crushing sound. The floor broke into many pieces that then rose up in the air.

That move alone was clearly absurdly powerful, but there was more to this attack. Immediately after Vincent's blade struck the ground, space distortions appeared all around Harold. Those distortions were actually highly compressed air, formed under the pressure of Vincent's sword.

The next instant, the distortions turned into plasma, and exploded together with their surroundings.

『Exploding sword』

This was one of Vincent's techniques that also appeared in the original story, and it was one of the very few attack methods that he had that wasn't short-ranged.

Harold managed to dodge by a hair's breadth. Although this attack did not deal much damage in the game, Harold had to consider the fact that this was Vincent and that not a single one of his attacks could be taken head-on.

And, above all, in the game, each of the plasma attacks would appear at a predetermined distance of about one meter (3 feet) only, but here, they were generated at random in a fan-shaped area that started from the point where Vincent's sword had struck the ground. The technique's area of effect was much wider than in the game, and it was therefore harder to dodge. There was only a second between the moment when the distortions appeared in the air and the moment when they turned into plasma and exploded.

If Harold was hit even a single time, there was a very high risk that Vincent would rush at him immediately after.

"How the hell can you create plasma by just swinging down your sword?!"

Harold almost voiced out such complaints, while ignoring the fact that his own speed and movement went completely against the laws of physics.

But when he considered things calmly, he knew he was not one to talk, and that this world was simply a complete fantasy in this regard.

Despite all of that, Harold was still putting quite a lot of pressure on Vincent, as a matter of fact, they were currently on equal standing. Perhaps it could even be said that Harold had the advantage considering the fact that Vincent was more injured than him.

Harold had been continuously attacking and retreating while aiming at the thin parts of Vincent's armor and the small gaps within it. The damage dealt through that method was not much, but it had been accumulating. At this point, most of the hard material under Vincent's armor had already been destroyed. The wounds and blood that Harold could see on Vincent's body were a proof of that.

(And yet his movements haven't weakened at all, that makes no sense...!)

On the contrary, Vincent was adapting to Harold's movements. Seeing how he was incoherently murmuring "Eliminating the target is the top priority" over and over again, it did not seem like Vincent currently had a sense of self or reason, and assuming he was able to disregard pain and tiredness due to that, then the fact that his attacks had not weakened would not be difficult to believe.

However, Harold figured that if that was the case, Vincent's movements would normally be more monotonous and lackluster. Yet while Vincent's expressionless face was somewhat reminiscent of Liliu and Ventos, he was not fighting as mechanically and straightforwardly as them.

At first, Harold's strategy had been to create an opening from a distance through diversions and disturbances, and to then jump at his opponent to attack and withdraw. However, after Harold repeated that a few times, Vincent counterattacked.

He avoided Harold's blow and pretended to counterattack. Fooled by that feint, Harold tried to dodge but it was then that Vincent's real counter came. As one would expect, Harold was unable to avoid that one, so he blocked it with his sword instead, but he was still blown several meters away.

If Liliu and Ventos were robots programmed to repeat a regular set of movements, then Vincent would be a robot with an artificial intelligence that gathers experience and changes its movements accordingly. That was basically the difference between them.

And the fact was that, compared to the first stage of the fight, it was becoming more and more difficult for Harold to attack.

(... Hold on, hold on, don't tell me he's actually learning?)

That was just a passing thought, but even since Harold had taken over this body, he was sometimes struck with bad premonitions which would very often turn out to be true.

And if his thoughts were right, then that would mean he was facing a killing machine which not only did not fear attacks and could therefore keep moving when taking damage, but it could also study its opponents' movements. Moreover, since Vincent himself was also initially very powerful, his attacks could kill Harold in a single blow, and his defense was like that of a fortress. To make matters worse, because Vincent was currently brainwashed, his fighting pattern was not the same as it was in the game, therefore Harold's knowledge of the original story was meaningless here.

"Heh, so what?"

Said Harold, only to act tough. But when that mutter actually came out of his mouth, it suddenly sounded determined and full of confidence.

Perhaps it was odd, but— —Harold was actually encouraging himself.

'If you hardly know any of his patterns, then you just have to figure out new ones.

If he's studying your movements, then use that against him.

Harold Stokes can do it. You know that better than anyone else.'

Harold let out a forced but fearless laugh to encourage himself even more.

And the next moment, he let go of his restrained position and dashed forward at top speed.

'Air Dash'. The first time Harold had used this technique in an actual fight was in his battle against the Sarian empire's mage, Ritzert. At the time, he was already doing the impossible by being able to speed up or change directions while using the skill, but since then, several years had passed and he had perfectly mastered the use of three dimensional maneuvers at high speeds in the air. However, while back then, Harold had been too fast for the enemy; in this fight, Vincent was quite capable of coping with Harold's speed.

Even so, despite being aware that his move would be seen through, Harold still rushed towards Vincent's chest. At his maximum speed, he kicked the ground to fly even further away from his initial position, and he then kicked the air through the air dash technique in order to take his opponent's back. Harold was aiming for Vincent's neck. Such a vital area was, of course, protected by Vincent's armor, but Harold's goal was neither to kill nor to deal any damage to him, his aim was the act of "slashing" itself. Then, just like Harold expected, Vincent used his left gauntlet to stop the blow.

Even since the start of the battle, Vincent had been using his gauntlet to block any attacks that he was seeing for the first time. But after Harold used the same slashing attack twice and then thrice, Vincent counterattacked instead of blocking the blow.

Harold dodged and sneaked behind Vincent while preparing to attack.

In response, Vincent released a punch behind himself with his left arm. His main goal was not actually to attack, rather, it was to prevent Harold from attacking again.

Although Vincent was not holding his sword with his left hand, the attack was still sharp and powerful. Moreover, if Harold received the blow, not only would he lose his stance, but Vincent's large sword would also come at him right after.

Yet, despite being aware of that, Harold still dared to take the punch. The gauntlet was not as strong as the large sword, but it still was powerful enough that if he had taken on the punch directly without defending, he would have had to prepare himself to break a bone or two.

Then, the instant after he blocked the punch, the large blade of Vincent's sword came swinging down at him. This blow alone could put an end to the whole battle, and at worst, it could even kill Harold on the spot.

But he still barely managed to avoid the attack. He would normally dodge such an attack by jumping backwards, yet this time, he stepped forward instead, letting the sword pass him by, almost grazing him.

This had been a gamble. Harold absolutely could not have afforded to receive that counterattack. If his timing had been off by the slightest of delays, he would likely have been cut in half starting from his back or from the back of his

head.

It might have been impossible for him to avoid the blade if his battle capabilities were not currently being boosted by his sword. Still, while feeling the ground break under Vincent's sword, Harold slipped right through death's fingers.

Following that move, he once again went behind Vincent. However, Harold could not use a counterattack at this point. Although the last action of his set of movements had taken a mere instant, it was precisely because of that that he had needed a high concentration to do it properly. And it was simply too difficult for him to directly get on the offensive the moment after.

To prepare to start yet another exchange, he opened the distance between Vincent and him again. With this, the series of movements Harold had just used was likely going to be much harder to pull off again. The reason the fight had been lasting for so long was that, because he had been at a loss as to how he could win the battle, Harold had been trying various things to study the pattern behind Vincent's actions, but the process had prevented him from dealing any decisive damage.

And what Harold had learned was that Vincent would always counter attack against his moves after seeing them around three times.

(So, I have to pave the way for that third time now.)

Harold took a breath and repeated the series of movements he had used right before, with the determination to put his life on the line. The second time was even more dangerous than the first. As the sword passed by the side of Harold's head by the end of his choreography, he was able to hear the wind generated by the blade much closer to his ear than before. He even noticed a piece of cloth, which had been sliced off of him, fall at the feet of Vincent.

Vincent was able to follow Harold's moves much better this second time.

'If he does it a third time, I'll kill him for sure' Vincent was surely thinking so, assuming that his brain still had the ability to think at all.

Any mistake here would spell Harold's death. Harold was terrified as he waited for that which he had been continuously avoiding.

Running away was not an option. In this situation, he needed to jump at the side of death in order to survive.

(...I guess now is the time. Really, I should have made my resolve way earlier.)

Harold clearly understood now. He had not been fighting against his fated death, he had been escaping from it.

Although once he used his “switch”, his feelings of fear were pushed away by the small parts of Harold that still remained within him, that did not mean that Kazuki himself was able to confront his fear of death. Perhaps that escapism was coming back to bite him in the form of Vincent.

Therefore, right now, both Kazuki and Harold needed to take action. Kazuki needed the resolve to fight alongside Harold Stokes. He needed the resolve to challenge fate itself.

Kazuki’s resolve, his knowledge about the game, and Harold’s capabilities. Without all of that, it would be impossible for Harold to win against Vincent or Justus.

"I’m coming for you, you damn puppet!"

And so, Harold jumped to the side of death for the third time. He sneaked behind Vincent while avoiding a sword slash that was coming at him. Once again, Harold had taken the back of Vincent, but this third time, Vincent’s response was even faster than before. Vincent released a punch behind himself without giving Harold any time to take a fighting stance, but Harold blocked it by using his sword as a shield.

Up to here, everything had happened like the first two times.

Vincent’s large sword was already coming from over Harold’s head. Even if Harold stepped forward or jumped behind, he would most likely be unable to avoid the attack. Therefore, he stayed where he was.

Then, he pivoted off his left foot like a gate opening, therefore shifting his whole body slightly to the left. In its vertical descent, the large sword missed Harold by a paper-thin margin.

However, unlike the first two times, the sword was not swung down low enough to smash the ground. That was because Vincent believed that if he did this, his response would be delayed once Harold would move behind him. This was the result of Vincent studying the pattern behind his enemy’s movements. Vincent assumed his opponent’s next move and optimized his own

movements accordingly.

So, what would happen if Harold moved outside of Vincent's assumptions? The answer to that were the innumerable scratches and wounds on Vincent's armor and body.

Most of those damages had been dealt immediately after the start of the fight, before Vincent could accumulate data about the patterns behind Harold's way of fighting. Which meant that the longer a fight against Vincent lasted, the more disadvantageous it would become for his opponent, unless a decisive blow was dealt at the very beginning.

But there was a flaw to this way of fighting. Vincent's ability to learn patterns was only a passive technique.

Although he was able to respond upon being attacked, he could not use his own attacks as a starting point to control or predict his enemy's actions. Perhaps that was some kind of technical limitation.

In any case, the current situation was outside of Vincent's expectations. Harold moved at a spot that was even further away from the sword that Vincent had swung down with his right hand. Vincent did not have time to raise back his sword to attack, and since, earlier, he had attacked with the gauntlet on his left arm, which was his main means of defense, it was now too far away from Harold.

The problem was that this was the perfect distance for Vincent's fighting style. Moreover, Harold was not currently using any spells to accelerate himself, and speed was what he needed to release an attack light enough to allow him to directly follow up with a combo and yet powerful enough to make his opponent flinch.

That would not be an issue if Harold used a special technique or magic.

However, those techniques needed to use mana, and he would therefore need to slightly charge them before using them. He did not know at all if a normal sword attack would work, but he did know that at this distance, and with an opponent like Vincent, using up time to charge an attack would create too much of a gap for the enemy to exploit.

Then, what was he going to do? Harold's answer to that was neither to use a normal attack nor a magic attack.

His answer was to use his bare hand, striking with his palm.

A jab with the heel of his palm was going to be much faster than swinging his sword. In the game, the 'Palm strike' technique was only worth anything when used in the middle of a combo. Moreover, Harold was going to use it with his left hand, which had such a weak grip that he could not hold his sword with it, and given how strong Vincent's defense was, the technique would deal a ridiculously small amount of damage to him.

— Or at least, it would if Harold was actually using the game's technique.

" 'Thunder Palm strike' !"

As his palm struck Vincent's jaw, an electric shock was simultaneously transferred from Harold's left hand.

In the eight years he had devoted to avoiding death flags, he had learned all of the techniques that Harold Stokes could use in the game. He had also tried to learn the techniques of other characters. And, on top of that, he had put some effort into figuring out new techniques that had not appeared in the game. This "Lightning palm strike" was one of them. As its name implied, this technique combined a strike from the palm with an electric shock.

Truthfully, this attack did not deal much damage either. That was because, just like for any other such skill, the electric shock would need to be charged before attacking in order to deal any real damage.

But this technique did not waste any time on charging. Harold simply released the palm strike and let the electric shock charge itself in the short time it took for his hand to reach Vincent. Because of that, neither the physical aspect of the attack nor the electricity dealt much damage.

However, it was effective enough. All that Harold needed was to paralyze Vincent's muscles with the electricity so as to stop him from moving, even if only for an instant.

The brainwashing allowed Vincent to disregard any pain, but no matter how brainwashed he had been, it was still impossible to restrain the natural responses of a living being's body. Even if he had some of the characteristics of a game character, Vincent was still a human being.

"...!"

Vincent did not say a word and there was no change in his facial expression, but Harold could tell that he had successfully made his muscles flex and freeze up, just like planned. In the fight between these two particular opponents, a single moment of stagnation was still much too long, to the point of being fatal.

By the time Vincent managed to move his body again, it was already too late.

"『Lightning Slash』"

The sword attack, which Harold had secretly been charging to the maximum, hit Vincent right in his abdomen. Even so, Vincent did not fall., He raised his head and tried to swing his sword some more, but that was not enough of a threat for Harold.

Harold was attacking continuously, without giving Vincent any opportunity to use his weapon. The more he attacked, the more powerful his attacks became.

After Vincent's armor was burnt off by the lightning attacks, his upper body was pushed backwards by a thrust of Harold's sword. Right after that, Harold drove a strong spinning kick towards Vincent's abdomen, which was now defenseless. But before Vincent could fall down, Harold went behind him and slashed his sword up. Then, Vincent was sent floating into the sky by Harold's "Lightning Bird" skill.

However, Harold's combo was still not over. That was because he understood that a superficial attack would never be enough to take down his opponent. Before long, his combo had reached a count of one hundred hits. Vincent's body had risen remarkably high up.

And then, Harold held his sword straight upwards right under Vincent's body, and the point of the blade started radiating with an intense light. That was Harold's strongest technique, it could take away a little more than 60% of the total HP that the main character of the game had at level 100, which was the game's highest level cap in the first playthrough.

A lightning attack was fired from the tip of the blade, creating a tear in space around the ceiling of the ruins, and from there fell a bolt of lightning that hit Vincent's body together with Harold's sword. Then, Harold swung down the sword as if to cut Vincent in two.

" 'Lightning clash' !!"

A loud sound of thunder, that did not fit in the ruins, resounded. The ruins trembled as a thunderstorm raised a cloud of dust in the area. After a while, the cloud slightly cleared up, and a single person's shadow appeared from inside. The man was gasping for breath, but he spoke to his fallen opponent as arrogantly as ever.

"Looking good over there, Vincent—— but this is my win."